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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the anticipated advantages and disadvantages of a proposed trimester plan for a Birmingham (Alabama) high school. The proposed plan would maintain the usual length school year, simply dividing it into three "mesters", rather than the traditional two. The Birmingham trimester plan also would lengthen each class period to 85 minutes; each day would run from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and would consist of five class periods. Each teacher and student would have classes scheduled for four of the five periods and would be at school either from 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. or from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. After describing the proposed trimester plan, the authors discuss its probable advantages and disadvantages for the secondary school program as a whole, and for the secondary visual arts program in particular. A final section lists prerequisites for the success of the program and possible pitfalls to be avoided in its implementation. (JG)

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Pilot Study at Ramsay High School

Birmingham Public School System

Birmingham, Alabama

The Trimester Plan as it Relates to a Secondary Art Program: Advantages, Disadvantages and Opportunities Implied

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PILOT STUDY AT RAMSAY HIGH
BIRMINGHAM SCHOOL SYSTEM

The Trimester Plan as it Relates to a Secondary Art Program: Advantages, Disadvantages, and Opportunities Implied.

Prologue

I. The Trimester

A. What it is

B. How it works

II. The advantages of the Trimester

III. The disadvantages of the Trimester

IV. The Trimester as it relates to a visual arts program

V. Summary: success or failure?

A. Prerequisites to success

B. Possible pitfalls to avoid

The Trimester Plan as It Relates to a Secondary Art Program: Advantages, Disadvantages, and Opportunities Implied.

PROLOGUE

This report is prepared by a teacher with a teacher's concern for the mechanics of the trimester. It should be apparent to all that the success of a new program depends greatly upon the zeal of the operators; in this case, the teachers. With approval by the Birmingham Board of Education that Ramsay High School (in 1976-77) be permitted to pilot the trimester for the city, it is wise that the possible problems be pin-pointed, identified, and faced. That is the major goal of this paper. An effort has been made to relate the problems as a teacher would see them.

I

The trimester is neither new nor innovative. While the concept is new to Birmingham, it has been fully operational in systems as far removed as Alaska for a number of years. Trimester is an educational term referring to the academic year having a division of three equal parts: historically, it has its roots in French and Latin, but has

only recently appeared on the American education lexiconic horizon. With the established and accepted use of the term "quarter" in our colleges and universities, it would seem to have been more appropriate to have chosen that term, rather than trimester. Clearly, its selection as the descriptive term for a school year results from the reluctance to identify the public schools with a four-part division of the year because of the obviously projectable conclusion of year-round schooling. Yet in many systems where the plan is operational the schools do pursue yearly educational programs, with students having the opportunity to take required courses in the summer (much as is now done here) thereby completing graduation requirements sooner than would the students who do not elect summer-school. Some of the trimester systems circumvent this possibility by prohibiting free public schooling for more than three terms out of any four. Should a student be desirous of the fourth, he must pay tuition. He is similarly hampered by a gerrymandering of schedules wherein consecutive courses, or prerequisites, are not offered on a year round basis. Additionally, a student may be discouraged from taking a full load of classes by judicious counseling.

In many ways, it actually appears that the trimester is simply a different way in which the traditional schemes (disciplines and durational limits) are adjusted, realigned, and

reoffered. Skillful manipulation of schedules successfully retains all characteristics of the old, and intact!

The trimester is proposed as a method of enriching the student's educative exposure through the offering of totally new subject matter or explorative study in depth of the traditional. In concert with these are the sub-courses, variously called phase-electives and mini-courses, questionable 'spin-offs' at best. The trimester is proposed as a means of providing immediate make-up opportunities to failed students. It is proposed as a help to the slower student through its elective nature, wherein a student may select courses in which he might hope to be more successful.

Most of the foregoing are certainly desirable features of the scheme and would most certainly be superior to the present system of rigid curriculum and yearly promotion. Doubts are raised by the proposed extended class lengths (80-85 minutes) as opposed to the current fifty-plus minutes in effect now. Teachers of the academic subjects, especially, fear that the lengthened class periods may be self-defeating by surpassing the students' attention span and intellectual abilities.

Simplistically, in the high school, a typical trimester day begins at eight and ends at four. Classes will be

Lunch periods will be approximately thirty minutes long and will be scheduled during the third period, resulting in some student and some teacher schedules being split, creating class periods which contain lunch periods, such as class-lunch - class. (See below)

	FALL	WINTER	SPRING
(1) 8:00-9:25			
SR (2) 9:30-11:05	S.R.	S.R.	S.R.
(3) 11:10 (lunch)			
1:40 (lunch)			
12:10 (lunch)			
1:40 (lunch)			
(4) 1:10-1:40			
(5) 2:40-4:05			

85 minutes long. Students will take three to four classes a day: teachers will be scheduled similarly. The same total number of units will be earned in the year. Some teachers and some students will have their first classes the second period. As a consequence, everyone will have a class the second period: thus, the proposed plan calls for a lengthening of the day by at least ten minutes to accommodate the paperwork, meetings, and special auditorium programs. Also, some teachers and some students will have classes the last period of the day (as a rule, these individuals will be those who came at nine-thirty or those who have four classes that mester.)

II

The disadvantages of trimester are usually ignored or touched upon but briefly: largely, I feel, because the explanatory papers are prepared by administrative personnel who might fear rejection of, or resistance to, the proposal. However, knowing how ponderously slow a school board and its subjects-system is to move, it would be well to delve more deeply into all objectionable features and to examine them from many sides at the onset.

Certainly, the most apparent, yet not the gravest, disadvantage will be the reluctance to change expressed by the tradition-oriented teacher. Though this problem is most easily

identified, it is the one most easily averted or resolved. Many teachers, when they understand the nature of the new, can adapt to it. For , being the most manipulated elements in the school hierarchy, they are the most immediately responsive to directed courses of action.

Probably, the gravest disadvantage will be the impediments created by the various school boards, state and local, in the altering of these established curriculum. Hand-in-hand, in this problem, could be the inability of the teaching staff to propose innovative subjects which are to replace the deadening, stultifying elements of the old as well as to retain those provocative features still valid.

A disadvantage, previously cited, is that of the extended class period. The attention span factor as well as the attested low intellectual attainments of inner-city children raise considerable and reasonable doubts. Will these children really profit from the proposed change? This is a question which may only be answered by the actual implementation of the scheme. If the teachers are provided with sufficient materials and monies, it may work. However, it is of some significance to note that those school systems which have adopted the trimester are not so impoverished as the Birmingham system. Seemingly, for none of these, was there a question of

adequate financial support: all, apparently, could acquire any devices or supplemental materials felt to be needed. It is no secret that this is not true of the Birmingham School System. Simple repairs and basic equipment are not now made or provided. It is unrealistic, at best, to assume that this situation will be emended in any way. Obviously, the teacher will be on his own, much as he is now. Personally, one thinks that the Birmingham teachers, having worked so long under these conditions, are fully capable of improvisation and field expediency.

Another disadvantage lies in scheduling. For some, coming to school early is a chore; for others, staying late is equally abhorrent. If the schedules and the individuals match (with preferences considered) there should be harmony. However, the needs of the school and the student body as a whole will most certainly be considered first, with some 'early-birds' coming to their first classes at nine-thirty, thus having to stay until four. The converse may also occur with resultant dissatisfaction. In addition to the time problem, scheduling must consider the assigning of teachers to teach subjects which they feel qualified to teach. One problem, immediately apparent, upon perusal of the simplified schedule in Part I of this paper, lies in the lunch period schedules. For some it may prove

violently inacceptable to break the class period for lunch: as a visual arts teacher, I would be within that group - paints would dry up and ideas would drift away!

A disadvantage, never mentioned, is the failure to provide for adequate teacher break/preparation time. This is not unknown now, but will undoubtedly be more severe in the trimester. With longer periods and longer days, mental and physical well-being may deteriorate. Also, the unacknowledged, but apparent, provision for teacher supervision of the lunchroom, during the teacher's own lunch period, is an inacceptable feature.

An unrecognized disadvantage could be the possible degeneration of class activities to "fun-and-games" time in an effort to fill eighty-five minute periods.

II

The advantages have been noted to some degree in the first part of this paper; i.e., enriched curriculum, early make-up, possible early graduation. If all concerned truly work toward changes in the curriculum, the trimester could indeed achieve the above. If the old disciplines are analyzed and stripped bare of traditional encumberances, re-evaluated and re-assembled in light of contemporary relevancy and need, new explorative and exciting subjects should evolve. If,

too, the teachers are permitted to teach what they can teach well, outstanding classes should result.

One advantage of note, but never voiced, is that of the chance to change. Should a student find himself out-of-step in a class due either to teacher or subject dislike, it could be possible for him to drop this class and to take another with less loss of credit than now occurs under these circumstances.

IV

The trimester cannot help but be an asset to the visual arts program. The extended class periods will certainly provide much needed time. It will eliminate to some degree the non-productive time spent in preparation and clean-up; not all, of course, for each class period demands this. Interruptions, as a result of period endings, will be fewer and work more consistent.

Because there will be only three to four classes in a day, rather than five or six, it will be possible to offer more variety in subject matter taught. That is, instead of teaching four Beginning Art classes and one Advanced, it will now be possible to offer Basic Art (a prerequisite for other advanced courses), Sculpture (all three-dimensional art), Printmaking, Advanced Drawing and Painting, and Personal Art (decorative art form not covered in other courses, such as jewelry, clothing, home items). Certainly, it would not be possible to offer

all these courses in any one mester, but the offerings would be staggered over a period of two to two and one-half years, thus enabling the interested student to take all of them should he so desire. This will result in two to three preparations, which is possible, but which would have been beyond consideration with shorter periods and more classes. This will work if the teacher can control the scheduling sequence of classes: that is, the "dirty" classes such as sculpture (using clay or plaster) after the "clean", such as Basic Art or Drawing and Painting.

There are two foreseeable problems: one of space requirements and one of fiscal support.

V

The writer has touched upon what are felt to be the most relevant and telling points in previous sections of this paper; but, in conclusion, would like to summarize by listing A, The Prerequisites to Success and B, The Possible Pitfalls to avoid:

A. Prerequisites to Success

1. Teacher awareness and acceptance of the trimester system is mandatory. If the teachers know what they are to do, if they have reasonable goals and sufficient support, the program should be successful.

2. A varied curriculum which will include not only the traditional but new break-away materials must be created.

3. Open-minded support must be provided by the administration at the board level whether or not failure or success results, initially.

4. Adaptability and willingness to try the new, not because it is new, but because it might work and might help our students, are required.

B. Possible Pitfalls.

1. Teacher resistance to the new, because they do not understand the system or are required to teach what they do not know or like.

2. An overburden of reports and evalutory sessions.

3. A super-critical approach toward failure and miscues which are sure to happen in establishing and making operational a new system.

4. Dissatisfaction among the teachers with the failure to incorporate humane consideration of the teacher.

5. Student inadequacies, which many teachers note as a deterrent to learning now, may prove insurmountable.

6. Because of B, 5 above, an over-emphasis upon "fun-and-games" to utilize the extra time.

7. A failure to recognize the opportunities within

the new scheme, with the resultant uncreative adaptation of the old curriculum to the new time periods. Therein, the subject matter is simply adjusted and rearranged, but remains essentially unchanged.

8. Inadequate fiscal support.

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